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Town Hall recording: <https://www.facebook.com/stcroix.fnd.1/videos/495561381639832/?fref=mentions>

Town hall meeting with EPA addresses flares, oil sprays from refinery

- [By SUZANNE CARLSON Daily News Staff](#)
- May 14, 2021

Nearly 300 people joined an online town hall meeting Thursday night to hear from public officials about the environmental health crisis being caused by Limetree Bay refinery on St. Croix.

Organized by Engage VI and moderated by Frandelle Gerard of CHANT, the town hall included representatives from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the V.I. Health Department, the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources, and the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency.

Representatives from Limetree Bay did not participate.

Gerard said the company provided a brief statement: “While Limetree Bay remains fully committed to being a good neighbor and responsible community partner, we respectfully decline the invitation at this time.”

Much of the forum centered around what officials do not yet know about recent problems at the refinery.

“There have been four incidents —major, serious incidents — in the last three months,” said EPA Region 2 acting administrator Walter Mugdan.

The refinery sprayed a mist of oil over the Clifton Hill neighborhood on Feb. 4, there was an exceedance of sulfur dioxide and hydrogen sulfide on April 22 and 23, there was an issue with the coker unit on May 5 and 6 that “probably

released certain hydrocarbons,” and the latest flaring incident Wednesday, which sprayed oil over homes in Enfield Green, according to Mugdan.

Residents of that neighborhood have been told to disconnect cisterns because the water is unsafe to drink, and many have been reporting symptoms from gaseous odors hanging over the west end of St. Croix for days on end.

“This is unacceptable,” Mugdan said. “This is not how a normal refinery operates.”

The recent problems are nothing new.

Operating as HOVENSA, the refinery shut down in 2012 after the EPA cited the facility for violations of the Clean Air Act, over a series of releases in 2010 and 2011 that sprayed oil over residential neighborhoods.

A Dec. 9, 2010, release in particular left scores of people — including some students and staff at St. Croix Central High School — complaining of various ailments, from nausea and skin irritation to respiratory issues.

New Clean Air Act violation

The EPA recently cited Limetree for a new violation of the Clean Air Act because no ambient air monitors were in place when the refinery restarted in February, and Mugdan said investigators are still gathering data on what happened.

The four incidents “occurred when there wasn’t a lot, or any, monitoring going on,” Mugdan said.

The EPA has brought in its own air monitors but they have not yet been installed, Mugdan said, and it will take time for Limetree to replace the five ambient air monitors it should have had in place before refinery production began.

Residents have been reporting complaints to the EPA and “we’re gathering the data that these folks are sharing with us,” Mugdan said.

Public health concerns

DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol and Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said that Gov. Albert Bryan Jr.’s administration is concerned for the public’s health, and they are working to figure out what the environmental and public health effects of the recent incidents may be.

West end resident Chenzira Kahina took officials to task for the recent events, which are merely a repeat of what many St. Croix residents experienced a

decade ago.

“People are dying, people are being harmed, our children are suffering,” Kahina said.

She recalled teaching at Central High School in the 1990s and “the nosebleed situation that we couldn’t explain, and the smell. So, it’s very difficult to come to this space again, 30-plus years later,” Kahina said. “Why are they being able to operate without monitors? Why are our agencies meeting but it’s not shutting down a refinery that’s killing people, ultimately?”

Gerard said that “the majority of the people being impacted are Black, brown, and poor,” and the same has been true for the last 50 years, along St. Croix’s industrial corridor.

Gerard relayed questions from community members in the online chat, including one who wondered how people can trust that their concerns are being taken seriously, given the decades of suffering St. Croix residents have endured because of the refinery.

“There’s a lot of history with this facility, regardless of who owns it,” Oriol said. “If it’s going to operate, it must operate without affecting the people of the Virgin Islands, all of us that live here.”

Oriol said government officials will ensure that the refinery operates according to government regulations, but “because of the history with this facility, it may take some time before there is trust.”

‘Highest priority’

Mugdan said the issue is “right now the highest priority for Region 2,” and EPA Administrator Michael Regan has been personally briefed on the response.

Sommer Sibilly-Brown, president of V.I. Good Food Coalition, who spoke for many, said in remarks at the conclusion of the meeting that “truthfully, tonight’s town hall was about liberation for this community, it’s about our community acknowledging its power and the right of the people of the Virgin Islands to breathe, to build ...”

“We want to be the best standard of clean air, clean water, healthy living. We should be afforded the right to live in paradise — the paradise that people who come on vacation get, the paradise that we’re selling in commercials. That’s not the paradise for guests, that’s the birthright of the people who were born here, living here, loving here,” Sibilly-Brown said.

She encouraged affected residents to report their symptoms and keep a personal log documenting the details of each refinery incident and any related health effects, and said Engage VI will hold future events on the refinery and other issues.

Thursday's forum is a first step, and "it is our right to ask these questions, it is our right to have answers. It is our right to know where information is," she added.

Anyone with questions or wishing to make a report of a gaseous odor can call DPNR at 340-773-1082 ext. 2221 or the V.I. Health Department's Environmental Health Division at 340-718-1311 ext. 3709.

The EPA community contact is Zeno Bain at 571-289-9450 or Bain.Zeno@epa.gov. Residents can also contact the Limetree Bay Command Center at 340-692-3000.

The EPA has created a website specifically for information related to the investigation into Clean Air Act violations at Limetree Bay:
epa.gov/vi/limetree-bay-terminals-and-limetree-bay-refining-llc.

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